

Runaway

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Runaway

by [Lavender_Seaglass](#)

Summary

He eyed her for a moment. Still very near to her. Then he pulled back, crossed his arms, tilted his head. His hair shifted and fell off his shoulder. “I see you’re feeling better, and your wit returned to you.”

“Is that not a good thing?”

“Some might mistake it for insolence.”

“And you?”

He made a sound in his throat. He rolled his shoulders and looked away from her. “That remains to be seen.”

Notes

(Reposted because bots are swarming some TES works. Sorry about that!)

i.

Of all the possible things she ever imagined might just be the last one seen before her death, Athlian had not once guessed it would be anything like this: an oddly tall Dunmer with what appeared to be a katana strapped across his back, turning around to face her with mild surprise and irritation pinching his sharp features, as if her flight from her death were merely a sight of inconvenience for him. His long white hair was pulled high in a way that accented the tall blades of his cheeks and the relentless slant of his eyes. His armour was worn and black and looked vaguely Daedric in design.

She knew who this Dunmer was immediately, of course. She would have known who he was even if she had not already met him once in the course of her unfortunately interesting life. It's why she barked a laugh despite knowing it would tear through her shredded side, which it did, and the resulting spasms of pain stole her very breath away.

Here she was, running away again, just as she had her whole life, a restless soul whose single greatest act of kindness towards anyone had been turning away before there could be introductions and the risk of invariably doomed attachments. Neither he nor she belonged here, not really, even if this realm was more securely anchored to Nirn than many a Nirnling's mind was to their own plane. But, even though he was just as mortal as she was, this man did not look like a mortal traversing a plane of Oblivion. Perhaps living two thousand years did that to a person, rendered you immune to suddenly presented possibilities of danger. How could it possibly be safe to be so blasé when walking through hell?

Not that it was any of concern of hers—it was but a brief thought, could be nothing more than that as she dismissed the last thing to ever amuse her just in case it might not actually be that. Just in case she might survive. She was running, fleeing, trying to get away from a Xivilai who had decided to destroy her. And, like all emotional, base brutes of its kind, it threw all of its terrifying passion and power into achieving its desire.

Why it had chosen her, or how she had managed to draw its attention and subsequently piss it off, she still didn't quite understand, but she didn't need to know the reason to know that the Stricture would have nothing to say about it. A Daedra could kill a mortal for whatever reason under these many cold and distant suns. It could be for sneezing too loudly, or wearing an obnoxious shade of orange found particularly unpleasant to look at.

Athlian kept up her embarrassing, shambling pace as she drew nearer to the Dunmeri man, and, Divines willing, passed him by. Perhaps her pain would not even warrant a sarcastic comment. She was, after all, just another incompetent person who had put themselves in some sort of senseless peril. She could have sworn she saw him take a step farther out of her path.

The Xivilai who was after her rounded the corner and spotted its quarry, it spotted her. It gave an animalistic cry that seemed to be haunted by some sort of incomprehensible echo crashing in the undercurrent of its unworded voice. Male-presenting, with a purple brand sprawled across its chest, the Xivilai carried with it a sword larger than her, and that it brandished with violence bright in its dark, pupil-less eyes. It charged after her, and it was gaining fast.

She raised her hand with a spell on her lips, ready to defend herself, and the pain from her side tore her concentration to shreds. She had intended to find some kind of obstacle to put between her zealous pursuer and herself. But here she was, utterly exposed.

Athlian was so upset she was no longer paying a scrap of attention to the powerful witness to her

mortifying death, not even to wonder if he might be coaxed into intervening. Her thoughts narrowed down to an infuriating epiphany. She was mad at herself, and it was with not a small amount of irony, because she realised that she wanted to live, she actually wanted to live, in spite of it all, after everything that she had lost, after everything that had failed to happen, after everything that had ended.

The crushing weight of it was too heavy. She faltered. She stumbled. She could not bear it.

And, when she felt herself about to cry out in frustration and dread, she felt a warmth wrap around her belly and pull her aside. There was cold, too, a rough firmness that cut into her pliant flesh like the carapace of a dead thunderbug. It took her long, precious moments to realise that some of the sounds she was hearing was someone speaking to her, telling her to quit struggling or she would be dropped and they would be done with this little amusement if that was really what she wanted.

He was holding her to him with a hand that was half the span of her forearm. With a kick to his leg she intended to protest that she could take care of herself just fine, if only he would let her, not realising that she had seen his chest wasn't the only thing well-protected by his armour.

She went limp as a withered lily in his grasp from the pain. To better control—or perhaps calm—her, he had smothered her against his side, pinioning her arms between her chest and his and though he was armoured, she thought she could feel his breathing, that was how close they were.

In her daze she dared to look out at her pursuer. The Dunmer was pointing at the Xivilai in a manner that was both astoundingly haughty and, all things considered, a very accurate representation of how utterly screwed her pursuer now was if it did not back off.

Which, being a Xivilai, it did not do.

With a clipped chant and a flick of his wrist the Dunmer made it be so that the Xivilai was simply *gone*. He then grimaced as the remnants of his spell dispersed, and she was sure that this change in expression cost him more effort than it had to banish a powerful Daedra back to some other realm of Oblivion.

“So,” she said between two wheezing breaths, “Are you going to let me go now?”

He tutted at her as if she had said something inane. Irritated, she shifted in his grasp so that she could find leverage to push herself away from him. Without a word to her he placed her on her feet, let go of her for but half of a second, and immediately she collapsed into a pile before him.

“Would it have been too much to show a little gratitude? A ‘thank you’ for troubling myself would have been nice. Though, you are in quite a state, aren’t you?” he asked, obviously rhetorically, and he sighed. He bent over and with a sweep of his arms he brought her to rest securely against his chest. Awkwardly, for he touched her mangled side and she thought her wound had reopened.

She felt for it with a shivering hand, to ascertain just how much of a mess she was, and that was when she realised both he and she were slick with her flowing blood. Despite being freshly bled, all of it was dark in the wan light of Fargrave. She had bled profusely, which at least explained the airy vacancy of her thoughts.

The world spun—all the stars above, glimpsed through the gaps in the pale sandstone buildings. His face above her, dark eyes and dark skin and an aureole of bone-white hair.

Divayth Fyr said to her, “You don’t fare very well on your own, do you? What a poor performance from someone I thought capable. You ought to stick to working with a group. You’re not very

competent otherwise, it seems.”

Befuddled, she gazed up at him, and, knowing who he was, after a moment she tried to rearrange herself so that she didn’t look like a complete imbecile. Which was a bit of a challenge, considering how liberally she had bled on him. And how he had saved her from a mistake she still didn’t quite understand. And how he felt about nearly everyone else but himself.

It was frustrating, and he must have known that, but her reaction surprised him at least enough that his eyes slightly widened as she broke out into a laugh in his arms, and then writhed and gasped in self-inflicted pain.

“Ah—ah! You—you remember me?”

“Of course I remember you. You were one of those Undaunted who came into my home completely uninvited. Though you did all prove helpful handling that construct and fabricant infestation. Which was a welcome surprise from a roving band of intruders. But, as I recall it, there was something else we spoke of and, frankly, it’s the reason why I remember you. I offered you a private reading after our venture to Clockwork City. An offer which you never took me up on.”

“Yeah, well, let me tell you,” she rasped, her fingers curling uselessly against her chest. “I used to be married.”

Looking at her, he might have been looking down at a particularly petulant puppy whining about some small thing he could barely bother himself to notice. “So? What in Oblivion does that have to do with me enjoying the company of a beautiful woman?”

“I was married. At the time.”

“Ah, my dear,” he said, with such weariness in his heavy words it was a struggle to draw her next breath. “I never have liked repeating myself. But then, it’s not every day I pick a stranger up off the street. Come. Let’s get you sorted.”

She had a retort for him, but it died on her tongue as her consciousness slipped through her grasping fingers.

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In another world, in another time, she had thought herself truly happy. It did not matter that she was often alone, it did not matter that she was the last one left awake without someone to coax her to bed, away from her work and towards a shared expression of affection and warmth celebrating divinity itself.

All of those long nights spent curating relics and scrolls and artefacts the rest of her cult could not be trusted with— it was a position entrusted to her not just because of her peerless education accompanying her notable ancestry, her descent from a significant number of mages who had been invited personally by Direnni out to the island of Balfiera to study in the shadow of Adamantia, at the centre of Convention.

It was also true that she was more talented than any of them. If only she had believed herself more capable of something more meaningful than being a glorified babysitter. If only she had been confident that she could find a destiny more grand than anything an orphan coddled by a Moth

Priest could envision while clinging to the teachings of a prophet whose idea of the gods was foreign to her sincere understanding of the world.

When she had come to the cult, she had been alone. When she lived with them, she was alone.

She got married, and that was nice. It was a period of time filled with well-wishes and regard that lasted longer than time they shared before their first parting.

Her husband was a man who was haunted by his sins. He would not let them go—and she had sworn that she would stand at his side, convincing him day by day that he was worthy of happiness and love.

He left her to pursue a cult of Y'ffre in the feral green heart of Valenwood. She wrote to him, again and again, and each letter went unanswered. Until she received this reply, though she never did remember which missive he actually might have been responding to:

I am well. I love you. I look forward to seeing you again soon.

A year passed, and still she did not see him.

...

ii.

Chapter Summary

She wakes, and looks for him in time.

She did not wake so much with a start as with a sudden realisation that she was in agony. Her throat was raw, her tongue was swollen so thick she might have choked on it if she had not woken at that very moment. Her lips were cracked like riverbeds in the throes of drought. Along with pain of it all, the remnants of her dreams spidered over her dry skin, skeins of uncertain discomfort which pulled unrelentingly against her. She could not remember where she was.

She *didn't* know where she was. How had she come to be in this bed?

Only vaguely did she recollect flight from a monster, a pursuit by sightless eyes, crystals aligned with celestial harmony, and her own spell that would allow her to measure the influence of heaven. The world had been bathed in blue light, and someone had turned around—and she had known them upon sight.

Athlian stirred under a pile of blankets layered upon her like sediment. The weight of them was a tight grasp of warmth around her against the chill which began to seep in the moment she disturbed them. If not for the severe thirst scouring her throat, she might have lingered for some time, preparing for the cold that was about to overwhelm her.

But she needed to drink something. Otherwise, she was sure, she would slip away again, soon, and this time without waking.

It was with a great effort that she gathered her strength and held it long enough to pull herself up into a sitting position. Her muscles protested, having grown lazy and stiff with lack of movement. The skin on her face strained, pain lacing through her lips, mouth, and throat. She could not find the moisture needed to swallow the awful dried mire of taste in her mouth.

Gingerly, she brushed along her side to take stock of the injury she understood was there, and was attempting to remember it in its entirety. The one who had wounded her—a higher level humanoid daedra?—had managed to dislodge a good chunk of the flesh of her waist. Without causing any fatal damage, luckily. She had been healed, however, had been attended to by someone who clearly knew what they were doing, who had handled her with a deft hand.

The bandages tied around her were wound tight enough to stay flat with her movements but not restrict her circulation. She did not remember the exact extent of her injuries, but she had the sense that this outcome was a good one, that things could have been a lot worse for her, even if her temples were throbbing like something was caged inside her skull and desperate to get out of it.

When her bare feet touched the ground she pulled several of the blankets around her. She realised that she was not exactly naked, though the robe that she had been given did not offer much coverage or warmth; she did not see her own clothing anywhere in the room. She did, however, see a bottled liquid on the small table near to her bed. The bottle was blue and stout, winking in the low light offered by the shaded crystal at its side. The liquid inside was dark, of a viscosity that was difficult to make through the glass of the vessel containing it.

With her one hand held at her waist to ensure that nothing gaped open and exposed her, Athlian reached over with her other hand for the neck of the bottle. It was cool under her curled fingers, neither colder nor warmer than the ambient temperature of the room. There was a soft sound of sloshing as she brought the bottle closer, uncorked it, and gave it a sniff. However close to dying of thirst she was, she still knew better than to just suck down something and hope it didn't kill her.

It did not smell like any poison she knew.

And, just to be sure, she wove her focus together and cast a spell of identification. A slight shimmer manifested around her hand, blurred, and then dissipated, leaving her with nothing but a sense that she knew what she held: a heavily watered down alchemical concoction with regenerative properties.

Without any more ceremony she brought the drink to her lips and forced herself to take it in measured draughts—she had to battle her own urges to down it lest she render herself sick, and throw up.

She sat there for a while with the empty bottle in her hands. In the silence, she ran her fingers along the edges, attempting to gather back her disparate thoughts. As she recalled it—and it really did seem surreal despite the small miracle of her own travel to this strange realm of Oblivion—she had somehow managed to enrage a Xivilai when conducting one of her experiments designed to collect data about the influence of Aetherial realms upon those Oblivion, to measure how the inter-planar tides of magicka flowed. Had that Daedra been attracted by her spell of scrying? It seemed unlikely. Surely, out of every animus who happened to be upon the plane of Fargrave at that time, her expression of power was likely one of the weakest. She should not have made the most interesting or challenging prey.

Perhaps it had been drawn to her by one of the components of her ritual, but, again, nothing seemed to fit that possibility. Some weak shards chipped away from much more potent crystals, a handful of sparkling sand from the Far Shores—nothing of it seemed of particular note or interest.

Pushing herself up off the bed, Athlian cast a magelight and walked to the other side of the room. In the summoned light she saw that the room was sparsely furnished, but, what furnishing there was, was of wonderful quality, made even more precious by its obvious mortal-making. Besides the bed and the table next to it, there was a settee set against the wall upon a verdant green carpet soft under her bare feet. Upon this settee was, surprisingly, set what few belongings she had been carrying while traipsing across Oblivion.

There was also a low table with pillows for seating, and a writer's desk accompanied by a backless chair. There was a wooden door in one wall and a darkened doorway in another.

She walked over to the open doorway, the light moving ahead of her without a sound or stutter. In the adjoining room she found a private washroom stocked with a variety of unmarked soaps, salves, and creams, and a number of linen towels.

Athlian did not allow herself the luxury of a bath. However, she did remove and fold the blankets she had wrapped around herself, drew herself some warm water, and, with a deal of care and respect for the work that had been done to heal her, she took a towel and cleaned her body under the robe and around the bandages. It was enough to make her feel a little bit more at ease. While she was cinching her robe closed she looked for a mirror to check her appearance. There was none to be found, she noted, which was odd and somewhat inconvenient, but she thought she could make do. She brushed her hair out. It had tangled while she slept, and the hue seemed almost tarnished in the poor light, far from the golden lustre she had coloured it for.

Freshly cleaned, she went back to the settee to retrieve some clothing. It took a few minutes to manage, but she got herself into a deceptively light tunic and leggings both woven with an abundance of enchantments. She forewent undergarments to avoid anything extra chaffing against the bandages wrapped against her ribs, and after a bit more rummaging she realised she did not have any shoes. Annoying, but not too serious so long as she was safe—wherever it was that she had been brought to.

She donned her socks, grabbed a blanket to drape around her shoulders, and went searching for some answers, to find out if Divayth Fyr had abandoned her, or saved her, or if perhaps she were now the property of some Daedra who thought it would be amusing to keep a pet mortal. It wouldn't have been the first time she'd been abducted.

To get an idea of where she wanted to go, exactly, and how she was going to get there, Athlian held in her mind two things: the thought that she would very much like some answers, and what muddled figments of memory remained from before her fainting. She remembered long white hair bright as snow in moonlight, a sense of dread, the feeling of her own blood coagulating into a crust against her skin.

Then she opened her eyes, and there was a faint, lambent trail of mist hovering over the ground before her, leading her to her destination. She followed without hesitation, pulling the blanket closer to her and marking the softness of its plush fabric like a lush peach. There were not many things in this place—what might have been a home—but they were all nice things. That seemed important.

Athlian followed the trail of light through several hallways, down one staircase and up another, a surprisingly long and complex route through a residence she had thought was at best the size of a moderate townhouse that a middling merchant might manage to purchase in Wayrest. The rest of the place was furnished minimally, with a few noteworthy pieces of furniture resembling some sort of flora that had been cultivated and grown specifically for the function of becoming furniture. It was odd, but a chair she passed gave her the distinct impression of having been a large capped mushroom in another life. And then, of course, it made sense—he was Telvanni, after all. She bit at her already split lip and cursed herself for overlooking such obvious clues.

She was berating herself when she walked into a room with substantial light in it. It took her a few moments to become aware that the trail had ended, and that there was someone else in the room with her. Someone who was looking at her.

“Ah, I see you're back on your feet already. That lizard was at least capable,” Divayth Fyr mused at her. She flushed, but she was unperturbed by how he spoke to her in such a way that he was not so much addressing her, as he was himself—this was the way that some remarkable minds functioned. It was nothing personal. While he was speaking, she gathered what bits of information about the situation were available, figured out what she could, and picked her response with some care. She would start with the most important questions.

“Where are we?” she asked.

“Still in Fargrave, if you're concerned. I wouldn't drag you unconscious to another realm of Oblivion. Not without a good reason, at least.”

“I know—I can feel we're still in Fargrave. I meant here—this place,” she said, giving a sweep of her arm to gesture at their surroundings. When she was done she adjusted the blanket so that it was around her again, while he looked around for a moment, then regarded her again with a furrowed brow.

“Ah, well, perhaps you might call this my home away from home. This is a villa kept for me by a colleague. My work requires me to be in Fargrave more often than not. This is where I sometimes stay when I am.”

Athlian nodded at that, falling quiet for a moment without a good idea of what to say next to him. So, almost without thought, she replied, “Thank you, then, for inviting me into your home.”

He made a sound that was not quite a laugh, not quite a sigh. “You didn’t exactly leave me much choice in the matter.”

“You didn’t have to help me, let alone save me. Thank you for that.”

“Yes, yes, it’s a bit late to be expressing your gratitude,” he said. He turned his back on her and gave his attention back to the task before him. She had not yet noticed, but before him on the desk was the katana she had seen him with before. The memory of it jolted through her like an electric current. And, after just a moment, she was thinking—no, it couldn’t be, could it?

“Is that the Ebony Blade?”

“No, it’s not.”

“But—”

“It looks remarkably like the real thing. Yes, I know. It’s a very convincing fake. I’ve already dealt with the trash responsible for forging it, and, as you might have guessed, he didn’t have much of interest to say. Quite tiresome, really. Right now I am examining this blade to see if there’s anything I can learn about the artifice employed to create it. Which, despite the creator’s apparent lack of wits, is actually competent.”

“I uh...see. It must be impressive, if you of all people could learn something from it.”

“Don’t be glib. I’m not interested in your platitudes,” he said to her.

“Well,” she started, her eyes widening and then narrowing, overtaken by surprise, and then not. She rejoined, “that was a tad rude, don’t you think?”

“As rude as wasting someone’s time?” he asked her. He turned to face her, again. “Why don’t you get to it already, and ask what you wish to?”

“Very well, then. Where in Oblivion can I get something to eat? I’m famished.”

Although he had been looking at her as she spoke, something happened to his face, and when she was finished, it was like he was actually *seeing* her. And he was irritated—or at least befuddled, which was an expression she never would have expected to see from him. Which must have reflected in her own expression, because he waved his hand at her in a dismissive manner, though he was not outright dismissive of her.

She expected him to point her in a direction and tell her to see to her needs herself. Instead, he stood up, pushed his chair in, and gestured for her to follow. His strides were long enough that she had to push herself to follow at his pace, the effort to do so drawing ragged breaths from her.

Sighing, he stopped and pointed down a hallway. “Go ahead and return to your room. Down that way. I’ll see that you get something.”

Athlian started at the suddenness of his stopping, nearly tripping and stumbling into him. Divayth

turned to face her. She thought his mouth would be pinched and his eyes mid-roll, but he seemed more vaguely concerned, if anything at all.

So she was quick to move. The last thing she wanted or needed was him deciding that she should be carried again. She wouldn't fight him, if it came to it, but more than anything it was embarrassing to experience such a potent manifestation of the differences between him and her. She did not need a reminder of how much more powerful the most powerful mage from the Mundus was than her.

"Is something the matter?" he asked.

"Nothing to be concerned about. My head is a bit light, but nothing that won't be helped by some food and a bit of reset."

"See you in a moment, then."

Athlian nodded. She repeated, "see you in a moment," and turned to part from him. She was not completely sure, because she did not look back, but she had the sense that he watched her for a moment before moving on himself.

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There was something that I meant to tell you, but you never gave me the chance. By the time you decided to listen, it was far too late.

Do you even remember what you said to me? What you vowed?

When we stood with rings for each other in the eyes of the Divines and swore that we would embody the love and grace of Mara, mother of the world, to whom even haughty Altmer bow and seek succour from. Two souls are said to become one willingly before her, and in that joining they become more than they were apart. I made my vows. You held my hands, and you made yours. My hands were so much smaller than yours—you said you liked that, how perfectly you could encompass them. And you smiled when you said it.

I know that you meant it. I think that you meant it. I do not accuse you of guile.

But, that is not absolution. Couldn't that be even worse? If it were not intentional, but you forsook your vows because you got caught up in other things?

So much for putting us before all other things.

By the time you finally listened to me, I had forgotten what it was like to be in love with you.

And I had never once thought that that could happen. It wasn't something I knew could happen until I realised it had.

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With a groan, Athlian emerged from sleep feeling like she had been poached in hot brine. She had grown hot, had sweated and strewn the blankets about her. She did not recall laying down for a nap, exactly, but she did recall laying down upon the bed and bundling herself in warmth to wait for food. There had not been an anticipation of slipping away into dreams.

The incessant twilight of Fargrave compounded the usual difficulty of measuring the flow of time in Oblivion. Without Akatosh's hand to guide it, time had a tendency to behave in strange and interesting ways, something she knew from personal experience. Still, she had the sense it had been a while since she had fallen asleep from the stale taste in her mouth and the ache in her stomach.

She was ruminating over the passage of time when a sound came from the corner of the room to startle her. She had not noticed her company, that she had not been left on her own.

Divayth Fyr, lounging on some pillows, turned a page in the thick volume he was presently engaged with. A partner tome floated nearby. He consulted it, leafing through a few pages, before turning back to the first.

In front of him on the low table was a spread of food that stunned her in its decadence. She stared, and stared, unable to help herself, sure that she was dreaming still—how could anything brought from Tamriel remain so fresh? The fruits, the soft cheeses. She actually touched her hand to her mouth to make sure that she wasn't drooling. She also looked at Divayth, but the food was where her attention quickly returned.

"Well, are you going to just sit there?" he asked without looking up at her. "Or do you need me to bring it to you as well?"

"Of course not," she said. She did not offer a defence or excuse for herself, though her face heated and a slew of half-throughout responses rattled awkwardly about inside her mind. Instead she got off the bed and padded over towards him, as quiet as possible to hopefully draw no notice as she sniffed at herself to ensure that she did not smell as bad as she feared she did.

Athlian was quick to serve herself once she sat down. She got for herself cheese, a handful of glistening fruits, a few slices of robust bread, and poured some water from a carafe humming with a network of enchantments, including one to regulate temperature, one to filter, and several to alarm for poison.

She settled herself, glanced at him once, and then tucked into the simple, indulgent meal. She did not think he was observing her, but once satisfaction settled and filled her belly, he closed both of his books, and she could feel his attention fall to her.

She finished her last bit of water. She looked back at him, watching him watching her. It struck her for the first time that he was leaner than she had thought him. Without the bulk of his armour, he was physically less imposing, though not insubstantial. He was still tall and broad in the shoulders, which the angling of his fitted highlighted. Undoubtedly that was on purpose. She didn't mind—she could admire him not only for his unparalleled strength and unending confidence. He also was not a bad looking mer.

After a time of quiet between them, he broke the silence. "How are you healing?"

"Well," she answered. "I feel better already than I did when I spoke with you early," she also said, and it was true.

"Good. The healer who tended to you was supposedly the best one presently on this plane, but she said that the poison in your flesh was not something that could be completely cleansed. You will

likely have a scar.”

“That’s not so bad then,” she answered with a bristling along her injured side, as if speaking of it alone had reinflamed her nerves, had lacerated her skin and laced it with corrupting poison to pollute her flesh. The Xivilai’s blade flashed abruptly through her mind.

“Let it never be said that I did not take care of those in my employ. Still, if scarring could have been prevented, but was not, then it’s a failure on the part of the healer responsible.”

“It’s really not that big of a deal,” she pressed back. She noticed that she had leant forward, in towards him, as she spoke.

In his turn he narrowed his eyes slightly, clearly not conceding the point, and vaguely irritated that he was meeting such pointless resistance. “I suppose it’s not for you. I thought you would have taken issue with mediocrity, but perhaps I judged wrong. What a shame.”

She was flustered now. Not only had her temperature elevated and drawn colour to her cheeks, she had the sense that they were heading down a path that would lead to a spat. And she did not wish to quarrel with him, for a lot of reasons. There were other things she wanted. “Look, whatever else I may have to say, I am honestly grateful to you. I was in danger, and the greatest mage of two Eras, who also happens to be the foremost authority on Daedra, saved me. It’s just...it’s just been awhile since I’ve spoken to another mortal, so my social skills are dull as a rusty knife.”

He considered her, taking her in with a small widening of his eyes. “A bit of a strange simile, but I understand what you mean, though in my case it usually takes me a decade to start to lose my own.”

So he could be reasoned with, she thought, even when she was not feeling particularly keen or clever or incisive.

“To be fair, you’re not exactly known for your aplomb,” she ventured.

He shook his head. “I have no respect for hollow vanities meant to soothe some idiot’s ego, or coddle their fear. Nor do I have time for it, unless I specifically decide to waste some.”

“That’s certainly one way to think about small talk. Anyway.”

“Anyway indeed. I have a question for you. I managed to recover most of the remains of whatever... it was you were doing in the Plaza of Portals, along with the belongings you left in your inn room,” he said. He stopped to indicate the items he had put on the settee. “And, I admit to a certain morbid curiosity. Were you attempting to access a realm of Aetherius? Because you’ll need much stronger foci than that if you hope to achieve anything like that in your lifetime.”

She placed her hands on the table, spread her fingers against the smooth, lacquered surface. It was cool to the touch. Or her touch, anyway. “Ah, no, nothing so silly as that. Really—what do you take me for? I know my own limits. I need to, if I have any hope of getting past them. But what you’re talking about—such is truly a fool’s errand. I wouldn’t waste my time on madness like trying to get to Aetherius ”

He nodded, crossing his arms over his chest. “I thought as much. You are sensible enough when you’re not...distracted.”

“Of course I am. I do have excellent taste in literature, remember?”

“Perhaps. But you have not answered my question. You’re flattering me to distract me.”

“Is it working?”

“That depends on what you want. What exactly is your aim, my dear?”

“I suppose it would be a futile task to keep the strongest mage off my back for long. Alas. All I was attempting to do was gather data on the flow of daedrons between Oblivion, Nirn, and objects possessing a particularly high Anuic-valence. I cast a scrying spell to help, and, as I remember, that’s when I got that attention of that murderous Daedra.”

Two fingers were on his chin as he considered her answer. “Did your scrying spell happen to involve any reflective components?”

“Reflective components? I mean... sort of? When the spell is cast, it creates a highly condensed layering of matrices to compensate for variables of action and inaction. I designed it following some interesting mathematical proofs I managed to get my hands on. You know how unbelievably intricate and infuriatingly imprecise scrying can be, you need a great deal of control to get anything of value from it,” she said. She paused for a moment to both breathe deeply and to gauge his reaction. He was still listening to her, engaged—and it was thrilling to her, to be able to speak at length about the technicalities of spellcraft. To speak to someone who not only was listening, but someone who *cared*. She continued, “but, this layering could be reflective, I suppose, because it effectively creates something like glass out of the air it occupies. It would be reflective when seen from either side, in addition to the normal transliminal reflections you get when casting shadows upon either side of the limen.”

“So, that Daedra could have seen its reflection if it looked over your shoulder? Or if it were standing on the other side of your ritual?”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“As I thought. That was the mistake that almost cost you your life. One made in ignorance, though I trust you will not repeat it. Listen closely: you provoked that Daedra by showing it its reflection. Xivilai, as you know, are awful base creatures so prone to violence they go after their own reflections. That is why there are no mirrors here in Fargrave.”

“Oh... Well. My mistake, but my folly might be both of our gain, given that it has put me so serendipitously in your path again, and I can take you up on your generous offer of a private reading.”

For a moment he was quiet. He exhaled lightly through his nose, and then he moved. Close to her. She could smell the tang of his power as certain as the pressure of it pushed against her skull. It was like a storm, a transmutation of the atmosphere around her. “Are you certain that’s what you want?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I weren’t sure that we both potentially could derive some pleasure from the exchange.”

“An enticing offer I would be loath to pass up,” he said to her, his tone dropping, his vowels sweeping her along with the emphasis he put on them. He regarded her, held her gaze, and then took all of her in, from her curled fingers to her golden crown. Then he laid his hand on her cheek.

She could not manage to swallow.

“However,” he began. And, though he was closer to her than ever, her throat closed and a bitter blankness seized her mind, she was captured by the thought that, after all, he had been simply

playing with her, like a bored cat pawing at its prey.

“However, I think it best for us both if you wait until you are fully recovered. Not only will you be a better audience then, you have demonstrated that you can be much more lively and—well, captivating, when you’re feeling yourself. So. Tomorrow, perhaps?”

She was doing her best to batter down a plea that he return to her. It took her some moments to understand what he had said to her. To really parse the meanings of his words, to find the couched kindness within them. “It seems like you’re saying that not because I don’t have a choice, because you’re so...considerate.”

“I’m not a complete monster. Most people just simply don’t warrant my concern.”

“Goodnight, Divayth.”

“Rest well. And I will see you again very soon.”

He made her feel small. He was powerful, so very powerful—so much stronger than her. But there was something alluring about this difference. A challenge, a chance, a possibility to surmount the odds and be considered worthy. She desired that, and he knew it, and he knew she knew he knew it.

What she didn’t know was why he didn’t press his advantage. Why didn’t he, when all she wanted was to be taken advantage of?

She laid down again, and soon was thinking of other things.

...

Chapter Summary

He reads to her. Finally.

By the glimmering shores of Lake Halcyon you held your hand out to me. You wrapped yours around mine, wove our fingers together, and then you kissed my knuckles and gestured where you wanted me to sit down. First, before you. I thought it was nice of you, and smiled. You had me seated between you and a tree, settled with something on either side of me. Then you told me your mother had taught you that you should always be mindful of how you treat a lady.

You were making sure that I was protected. That sat in my belly like a riverstone, cool and slick and smooth, something of questionable value, and not something I was sure I wanted.

Then we spoke about your father, who had taken you out fishing on this very lake. How you had fallen out of his boat and beneath the waves, how you had needed to be saved—and about the hundreds of mouths belonging to the creatures that dwelt in the depths that bit at you, or that you thought had done so until you were hauled out of the water by the collar of your jacket, coughing and pale and for the first time in your life grateful to be alive. It was your first burst of fear that was transmuted into something else like triumphant. It was the first time you defied death.

You touched my cheek. I angled my head, I let you lean closer without complaint. And, when you asked if you could kiss me, I said yes.

I would understand if you were upset with me. I knew what I was doing, I was aware I was playing along. I wasn't who you thought I was, not really. I was not the woman you thought you were falling in love with. Just one of the many perils of pretending to be weak.

Would you believe me I said I regretted it?

Or do you still hope that I might yet say I'm sorry?

.

Come what passed for her morning, Athlian woke with a ravening hunger in her. She got up from the bed, blankets draped heavily over her shoulders, and went to the table, some hope for relief from hunger kindled by the thought that perhaps her host had not cleared away last night's meal. In the gloom she thought that she saw the remains still there, but she did not quite trust herself. Maybe he had just left the dishes for her to clear. She could imagine him doing that.

There was food left for her after all, to her mild and pleased surprise. Though remnants of a previous meal eaten on another day, the leftovers appeared fresh as when they had first been served to her, preserved by a small bit of magic. She had not noticed it before. Now she did, a subtle weave of enchantments on the cookware and food alike to keep everything of high quality. It

did not seem important enough to be Divayth's work, but it could have been. Whoever was responsible, regardless, they had her gratitude as she finished off the meal.

Her host had taken his reading material with him. No doubt the subject matter had been something beyond what she was capable of comprehending so close to waking, so she wasn't particularly insulted, instead opting to get her own notebook from her belongings to review her last few entries. She made notes, several revisions, and considered where the course of her research could take her next. With the use of her scrying spell posing such a danger to her, her options for continuing in Fargrave were limited, unless perhaps she could find another cluster of vortices so potent as the Plaza of Portals, a nexus just as enticing but also well-protected. Could she hire protection? Maybe she could make a deal with a Daedra to guard her back while she worked.

She huffed at the thought of that, chiding herself for her lack of coherent thinking. Daedra could not be trusted by nature, and the nature of a passing Daedra was why she had suffered such a setback as this, the reason she no longer had several rare and precious objects in her possession. Though she could not blame any Daedra for the root of her problem—they were not responsible for her need to search the seas of Aetherius for the answer to a question she could not quite let go.

Of course, it was her decision to not resort to necromancy to get it. Not even a gentle beckoning to souls that might have something to say to her would be allowed by her conscience. Her time with a cult worshipping the Imperial Pantheon still left her with a host of sensibilities and habits she was nowhere near breaking. That's why she was taking such a circuitous route attempting to find a way for a peek beyond the mortal veil into the realms of Aetherius.

With a visceral cringe that pulled at all of her face, Athlian put her notebook down and moved to stack the now empty dishes. She would take them down in a moment, or at least find a servant to do so. Certainly there was some sort of help around. She knew that Divayth did not consider such menial tasks to be a worthy use of his valuable time. She didn't mind it, but she wasn't sure which way the kitchen lay.

But first, other things. She went to the washroom and began to draw herself a bath. While steam bloomed and thickened the air, she prodded at her side, gently to start, and then with more aggression towards herself with the intention of checking whether she was as healed as she thought. Her side was itchy, the bandages themselves beginning to fray.

She made a decision—she judged herself convalesced enough. She unravelled the bandage at her shoulder with a quick spell and unwrapped the rest with care. Her skin beneath was red with shallow lines, and slightly sticky, but the majority of the wound was gone. What remained was a pink chunk of newly grown flesh about the size of fist. It was raw and sensitive, but the important—and amazing—thing was that she was whole.

Her bath was quick, efficient, and the best she had felt in a long time. She dressed in her smallclothes, and with steam still seeping out of the washroom like exhaled breath, she combed her hair out, patted it down until she considered it dry, and she was pulling on her shirt when she was struck down by her own thoughts: most likely, she was alone in someone else's home with a complete stranger. The realisation crept along her clean skin like a horde of many-legged bugs.

So she set off to search the building for someone else: Divayth's "friend," an assistant of some meagre talent, a Scamp who served as his porter. There was no-one to find, however, Daedric, mortal, or otherwise.

She was utterly alone.

Athlian found herself plunged into a rushing vertigo at the thought, not quite sure how to feel about

this revelation. After a few long-stretched seconds, she had the thought that she did not need to wrap her mind around it. Nor did it have to mean anything—she was simply by herself, and that was the way it was. It was up to her to handle herself.

As she wandered around to locate the kitchen, it occurred to her that Divayth had trusted her enough to leave her by herself. This was important, she realised, because likely there was something in this building that could cause great mayhem—possibly catastrophe—if it came to fall into the wrong hands. Or if it were touched by someone with slightly suspect intentions.

The thought slipped from her mind, eventually. She focused instead on finding her destination. In the end she needed a spell to aid her—the building was in fact a villa of sorts, with a courtyard and separate bathhouse. The kitchen it turned out was tucked in the back, with halls so narrow and plain she was sure she was not far from the servants' quarters, though there were no servants she could see. With the nature of Daedra in mind, remembering that they cannot create and have no single original thought of their own, she thought it might be possible this place was a replication of a building that existed in the Mundus, from the floorplan down to the smallest details of cracks in the ceiling and walls. Or, it was possible—and this came with a shiver of awe mixed with something more heady, more heavy in her chest and stomach and core—this entire place had been translocated from the Mundus to Oblivion. Such an astounding display of power required for such a feat was nowhere near beyond what she knew him capable of.

When she was on her way back from delivering the dishes to the kitchen, Athlian took her time to examine what she was passing by. She thought she might be able to determine if it were chaotic creatia she were examining, or matter transposed from Nirn.

She had her hand on a wall, and her face close to it, when something happened.

The wall was there one moment.

And then, in the next, it was not.

After she caught herself from stumbling she looked up, and all around her were marvels. Her wonder swarmed her senses.

That was how she found his library. She spent a long time lost in its depths.

.

Divayth Fyr found her captivated by a treatise on the properties of the residue of et'Ada dreams. Stacked next to her were other veritable treasures: a manual for Psijic rituals before the Order saw fit to remove their island from the Mundus, poems composed by a Chimer mystic when she drifted through the lands of the barbaric Nords, a volume authored by several Kynreeves reflecting on the nature of loyalty and honour and how it manifested in the structures of their clans.

She did not know how long he had gone unnoticed by her when he cleared his throat, stepped close, and covered the treatise she was reading with his hand so that she really had no choice but to notice him. He wanted her attention. This is what his fanned fingers told her.

She looked up into his eyes, the bright scarlet like cinnabar. For a moment, she felt the warmth of Red Mountain breath down her spine.

“Are you enjoying yourself?” he asked her, voice low.

“I am, in fact. Very much. You have a remarkable library,” she answered. There was a challenge in her words, the heat of it spreading through her, a flush of unexpected but welcome enjoyment like basking in the sun.

He eyed her for a moment. Still very near to her. Then he pulled back, crossed his arms, tilted his head. His hair shifted and fell off his shoulder. “I see you’re feeling better, and your wit returned to you.”

“Is that not a good thing?”

“Some might mistake it for insolence.”

“And you?”

He made a sound in his throat. He rolled his shoulders and looked away from her. “That remains to be seen.”

With great care and reverence she closed the book she had been reading and settled it on her lap. “I know that if you did not wish to avail myself of your library, you would not have left me here unsupervised.”

“A keen observation. In any case, I am glad that you are feeling better”

It was a quiet laugh that she gave. “We both are.” Then she gestured to the chair next to her, not inviting him to sit down in his own home, so much as to be closer yet to her. “How are you? Was your time away productive?”

He did sit down. He waved his hand, and from the air appeared food, two clear crystal glasses, and a bottle of deeply, lushly red wine. She did not know much about alcohol—several decades of holy vows and service had deprived her—but she recognised the Aldmeri words upon the bottle. Not Altermi, but Aldmeri—truly, an ancient vintage easily twenty times her own age.

What she said to this was, “Ah, so that’s how you handle your chores. Translocation. Is that really more convenient than having a servant or two around to help with your more mundane needs?”

He sighed, vanished away the cork, and poured a glass of wine. He gave the liquid a moment to aerate. “Infinitely.” And that was that, clearly—he did not wish to speak on it more, felt no need to justify himself to her. “As to your question, both yes and no. I was able to get a deal done, but nearly as much as I intended.”

“Isn’t that always the way of it?”

“No,” he said simply.

Instead of rolling her eyes she leant forward to accept the glass he offered to her. The first sip of wine was unbelievable—so aromatic, she felt she had fallen into a field of flowers. Her entire body warmed with spring.

“Wow,” she said.

“Indeed.”

They were silent for a moment. He took a fruit off the platter, a kind she did not recognise. The

spiky, reddish hair-like spines of it did not look particularly inviting, but he handled it without any hesitation. He produced a knife, carved into it, and pulled out a glistening glob of pearlescent gel. He tipped it off the knife and into his mouth. He then wiped his hands and placed the fruit down on the plate it had been summoned with, and she watched his mouth the entire time, even as he was chewing, especially as he swallowed.

“So,” he began. “About our engagement.”

“I would be honoured to have you read to me from your works,” she said. She raised her hands, palms up, indicating the book-filled space about them. “And here would be the perfect place, no?” Her smirk felt like it was taking over her face.

“A bit on the nose for my taste, but it will do,” he said. He made a gesture with his hand like he was waving something away from him—or to him. One pass, his hand was empty. On the next, a slim volume was held in his hand, his fingers braced against its gilt spine.

She was somewhat surprised that his work was not written on a scroll, but what he held was a beautifully produced printing of it. That much was obvious just from the finesse of the spine and evident suppleness of the leather covers.

In the quiet that settled she placed aside the treatise which had been discoursing the potential implications of liminal accretion and degradation around what scattered scintilla remained of et’Ada dreams within the Mundus. The author also proposed a method for contacting Ehlnofoy that otherwise had long since fallen silent as far as mortals like herself were concerned. It was fascinating, to think that she might be able to commune with the bones of reality itself, but she set the treatise down and gave the mer across from her all of her attention.

Finally, he found a passage that must have satisfied whatever criteria he had. He closed the book around his thumb, took a sip of wine, and looked across at her. “To begin with, this is an unpublished account of one of my visits to Moonshadow. ... ‘And thus I arrived at the roseate steps of the palace housing The Queen of Roses, Mother Morrowind, Lady Twilight, and assorted other flowery titles. Despite the astonishing beauty of the structure, it displayed clearly one of all Daedras’ central character flaws: whether they be Prince or Scamp, Atronach or Daedrat, a Daedra is not able to make something new.

‘This lack of imagination is a severe limitation. No matter how beautiful Azura made her realm, it was something that I had seen before. Nor did one have to live so long and important a life as mine to recognise the patterns, to be disappointed by the lack of novelty and subtlety. My assistants were, to my great shame and embarrassment, unfortunately struck by the artifice on display to them. They were half-blinded by the glamour and splendour. Their tears did the rest of the little work needed to render them completely useless to me.’”

Athlian sighed, gently. She emptied her glass of wine, and leant forward for him to refill it for her. With a twist of his wrist he pulled the bottle away and placed it back down near him. He watched her, obviously contemplative.

“You are not impressed. This reading isn’t to your liking?”

“Well...” She did not ramble, but she also did not know how to answer him, other than meeting his gaze and waiting for him to speak again. Maybe he would understand. Maybe he would not.

“I see,” he said simply. He flipped through the pages and settled upon something else. “‘While it is true that all mortals are prone to misguided nostalgia for their youth, the beauty of Moonshadow was but a pale shadow compared to what I had seen in my years upon that hidden isle. The

architecture of High Elves is pretentious and grandiose and often profoundly boring in its precise predictability, but every part of Artaeum was beautiful, including the buildings which housed the Psijics and their works. Not all Psijics are alike in taste, sensibility, and reasonableness, but it would be hard to find any mortal who did not find something to appreciate about their sequestered island.

‘I recall in particular a lesson from my time upon Artaeum, when I was much, much younger, and had not yet outgrown what those reclusive monks might be able to teach me. We were seated upon one of the many knolls perpetually laced with glistening dew, overlooking an ocean hues more deeply than the most expensive sapphires. Magic could be heard in the air—literally. Every so often the harmonics of spellcraft would sing in the air like a well-rung bell.

‘Across from me was a mer who had caught my young eye, and had garnered my enthusiasm by blessing me with her knowing smiles. She was older than me, by many decades, but in terms of rank, we were both Initiates into the Order. Her skin was like molten gold. Her eyes shone like aetherquartz. She knew I was in pursuit of her favour. This she told me eloquently by the way she bit into her apple, sucked at the delicate flesh, and looked right into my eyes.’”

When Divayth was nearly finished speaking, Athlian stirred. She got out of her chair, and it was like she was moving through water, or a dream. Reality seemed to flow around her as she came to him.

Without anything but hypnotic ease, she lowered herself and tilted her head and breathed the same air as him. His hand came to the nape of her neck and pulled her down with firm purpose. She was in his lap, and he kissed her. He supported her back as she pressed against him, shifted, placed her hands on his shoulders and opened her mouth to him. Then she demanded more from him—a demand to which he vigorously responded. His beard was coarse against her skin as he broke away and panted against her ear, heating her already warm skin with his breath.

He ran his hand down her leg, then up, clenching powerful fingers into the skin right beneath her hip. She shifted against him, moving so that she brushed against the inside of his thigh. He exhaled into her ear, she nipped at his lip, and he dug his fingers into her ass until she jerked from the pain of it. But he held her to him, steadily, pressing down upon her as she pushed back against him.

In the heated haze of her mind she imagined her hand as it moved: down his torso, skittering down his leg, resting on the muscle of his thigh. She reached for his cock—and he denied her her aim. He bucked her up and caught her, broke the kiss and turned her so that her back was flush to his chest. She was surprised, not quite sure how she had been handled so easily, but he had not hurt her. Far from it.

So she reached for him again, and again he denied her. With one hand he held both her wrists against her throat. She could feel her bones grinding against each other as he stroked *her* thigh and whispered into her ear, “There’s no need to rush me.”

Breathless, she responded, “Aren’t you anxious to feel good? I can do that for you.”

His mouth now was on her neck. Her ragged breaths were crushing her back into his chest, his grip upon her unrelenting. His teeth were on her skin.

He bit her.

“Let me show you what I can do for you, before you waste your breath bragging,” he whispered to her, so intimate the sensation froze her and she could no longer feel the pain of where he had just marked her.

As slow as if he had all the time in the world to give her, he stroked along her thigh. First the left, then the right. After a time of torture, he moved his hand to her waistband and forged beyond its edge. His fingers, already warm from touching her, slipped inside of her, and were far too clever for their own good.

Her response was strangled as he began with inserting two. He pulled his arm against her throat and she barely could draw air into herself through the pressure upon her. The deprivation compounded her pleasure until it exploded through her, obscuring her senses with how unwieldy it made her.

And then she felt a cough boiling up. She could not catch her breath, she could not breath—

He surrendered his grip on her and, gently, patted at her back. His other hand stayed on her center, stroking her through her twitches and spasms as she coughed her way through her fit.

She had not yet climaxed, however.

She knew, without a doubt, she could have told him to stop, and that would have been the end of it. Or at least this part of it.

By degrees, his hand stilled on her back. She leant back up against him, head on his shoulder, offering her neck. This time he was much more mindful with his grasp on her throat, pulsing it like the fluttering of her heart.

When she finished, she saw stars because he did something with his fourth finger that made prismatic shards of sun-struck glass careen around the corners of her eyes. She felt incandescent. She felt like she might end up as a puddle in his lap. Once he brought her through her end he withdrew his hands. She did not know what he did with her fluids, but he wrapped his arms around her and rested his head upon her shoulder. Her blasted mind was thrumming in the afterglow when he spoke to her.

It took awhile for the words to register with her.

“Let me know when you can handle round two, hmm?”

She reached out for him, settled into him. Her hand found strands of his hair and her mouth found his temple. She murmured, “What about you?”

“We’ll take care of me next. I’m considering letting you ride me. I might enjoy the view.”

Her next few breaths were short and strained, as if she were subjected to sudden and intense labour.

“Would you like that?” he asked.

“Maybe,” she answered.

They sat there for some time. Him with his head against her neck, her between his legs with her head back against his chest. Together, breathing. Slowly, with great care, through the fabric of her leggings, he touched her. He elicited a small sound from her he drew out by skillful ministrations, teasing caresses that had her writhing against him once again.

“Yes,” she breathed. “I want to mount you like a throne.”

To her great surprise he laughed—it was a sound which resonated through him and into her. He withdrew his hand from her waistband, adjusted her weight, and stood up with her in his arms. In

an alluring show of easy power he opened a portal and stepped through it with her. It was only to a bedroom within the building, but all the same his magic shimmered over her skin, an auroral brush of his sheer strength against her.

It was almost a bit silly how strongly she reacted to it. In another life, it would have been shameful.

Now, though, she laughed lightly as he placed her down on the bed and leaned in to reach for the bottom of her tunic. She touched her lips to his jaw and then helped him, raising her arms and pulling them through the sleeves. Her brassiere she removed and flung somewhere to the side as he worked at his own buttons and shucked off his pants in a rather unceremonious fashion. All that was left were her leggings. Her hands were down inside them when he sat down onto the bed with enough force that she bounced. With more care than he showed his own garments, he slowly pulled her leggings down, revealing her skin by half an inch at a time. Her flesh was pliant where his fingers gripped into it. Once her leggings were past her ankles, they were pulled from her and banished to another part of the room.

Her smallclothes followed right after them, thrown away like an afterthought.

Naked before him, she watched his eyes travel over her body. She thought, for a moment, about how many bodies he had seen bared to him, how many he had looked at, how easily someone like him would have access to as many as he wanted.

The only thing she was concerned about, in the end, was how those hundreds or thousands of partners had left him experience-wise. She was looking for a good lay—however deft he had been with his fingers, she had been with enough people to know that she really only had one interest in someone's manhood, and it certainly wasn't being used as a warm, moist sleeve to satiate someone's pride. She was not something to conquer. Nor was she some sort of ornament to be boasted about.

He lay down on the bed next to her. Good as her word, she sat up and straddled him with one elegant movement. Atop him, she was more than slick enough to accommodate him without any discomfort. Though she did need to adjust for a moment. Watching the changes ripple through his face, she thought about giving him a compliment on his size, but she refrained. He already thought highly enough of himself as it was. Why grant him any satisfaction he did not strive and sweat for?

She clenched around him and more tremors shot through him. She moved slowly, at first, full to bursting and stretched. Then, with drawn out thrusts, she rode him, one pleasant stroke at a time. He was half unsheathed when he swore, grasped for her hips, and slammed his swollen length back inside of her.

Immediately she pulled herself off of him and slapped him. Exposed to the shocking chill of the air, recoiling, he did not respond verbally but looked up at her with wide, egoless eyes.

"Are you going to behave?" she asked.

"Are you going to stop taunting me?"

"Of course not."

The sound he made was almost a growl, issuing forth from his chest with such power she felt it in the core of her.

Her nails dug into his dark skin as she shoved him down and back inside of her. Both of them shuddered, but then she was moving again, setting a rapid, aggressive pace, and he soon was

matching it so that no part of him was sliding in and out of her.

Even now, even here, even mounted atop a sorcerer older than her family name, she was not safe from her mind. It assailed her with a flash—a great flaring of light, a malevolent smile, a clutch of crystals scattered to the void. She clamped tight around him, sliced into his skin with her nails, and she did not know if he knew why she was suddenly so still.

But he wouldn't. She wasn't going to let him need to.

She became her own solution by performing a great feat. It did not need an audience to be so—she knew what she was accomplishing by dragging the spell out of herself even as she resumed her motions with him, feeling the blooming swell of his muscles as she conjured magical glass, and her reflection.

She witnessed them in the act. Him beneath her, gazing up at her turned head, the strain of all of him in thrall to her, her hair billowing down her back and already sticking in some places to the sweat she has produced. The motion of their coupling was limned in the rolling curl of her back. Naked, vulnerable, but also so beautiful. Alive, and capable of pleasure.

The next series of moments became a blur. She came down on him at an angle, and he reached so far inside of her that he slammed up against resistance. The shock of it shuddered up through her and ended in a free cry. In response, his hands dug into her ass like a hungry man into a meal. He flipped them, so he was on top, and shifted so that he could replicate the angle she had found—only now, with great purpose on his part, he pulled and bent her leg and he could ram that same spot again, and again, and again.

She watched herself come undone.

When next she could understand what she was seeing, she realised that her mirror was gone, likely shattered when her mind had been. They were still in bed together. This was something of a surprise to her. A pleasant one, one that came with a bit of warmth in her loose and tight chest in which her heartbeat echoed.

He was sleeping. Deeply, one arm flung out. The covers had been arranged so that they both had probably been under them at some point, but he had pushed them back and was resting without anything on his chest. She could see the rise and fall of it. The evidence of his mortality, same as her. The weakness of a beating heart.

He could have left her there. Or she could have left and gone to her own borrowed bed, or gathered her things and departed. Healed, and done with their coupling, they needed nothing from the other. To begin with, he had not needed anything from her. But he had wanted something from her, and for her. Enough that he cared about her comfort.

They would never be together. She knew that, and had enough dignity to not wonder what if, to wonder if she might be the exception that made him change his very nature. But there was something. Something between them. And this she could see: two lonely people coming together, from time to time, until death inexorably washed her away. They would never settle down, of course. Nor were they suitable to be any sort of partners.

But they understood each other, and that was something after all. And it was more meaningful than being loved, because you could go crazy if there wasn't at least one person who knew who you really were. And who said, sure, why don't I spend some time together with you?

One day he came back for her.

She knew that he had, without a doubt. Eventually he came and looked for her where he had left her. But he did not find her there. He didn't seem to understand why, what it meant that she was no longer waiting for him.

This misunderstanding was why he then tried to reach her. There were letters sent. Searches and enquiries that told him where she was not and where he might try to make contact. He did manage to locate a place where there was a chance of meeting her as she went about her life. Perhaps it did not occur to him that she was not hiding from him. Perhaps he did not think to wonder if he had already asked far too much of her, and if this imposition was well beyond a step too far.

He kept trying. And trying.

Finally, he made the trip in person. But, she had moved on, and not even a ghost was waiting for him. The best he could have hoped for would be to reconcile with the void she left behind.

Whatever he found, in the end, it was no concern of hers. That part of her life was over.



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